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Why Do Churches Put on a Weekly Variety Show?

Mark 6:1-13

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Take One: Not long ago, Jim (the pastor of a small congregation) entered a supermarket and ran into Jan Matheny, a woman who only the Sunday before had visited with her husband and three children in the church that Jim serves. After exchanging pleasantries, Jim told her how much the church appreciated her visit and how he hoped they would return. Jan replied, 'Well, we enjoyed the service, but right now we're just shopping around for a church that meets our needs."

Take Two: Allow me to share with you my all time favorite Doonesbury cartoon. I like this one so much that Kathy had it framed and it has a cherished place in my office here at church. There are six frames, showing a couple being visited in their home by the pastor of a church they have just visited. Here's how it goes: "So what would you like to know about Little Church of Walden, folks? Don't hold back - I know how difficult it can be to choose a church." ---- "Well, what's your basic approach here, Reverend? Is it traditional Gospel?" ---- In a way, I like to describe it as 12-Step Christianity ... Basically, I believe that we're all recovering sinners. My ministry is about overcoming denial, it's about recommitment, about redemption. It's all in the brochure there." ---- "Wait a minute - sinners? Redemption? Doesn't all that imply guilt?" ---- "Well, yes, I do rely on the occasional disincentive to keep the flock from going astray. Guilt's part of that!" ---- (Man speaking) "I dunno. There's so much negativity in the world as it is." ---- (Woman speaking) "That's right. We're looking for a church that's supportive, a place where we can feel good about ourselves. I'm not sure this guilt thing works for us." ---- (Man speaking) "On the other hand, you do have racquetball." ---- (Woman speaking) "So did the Unitarians, honey. Let's shop around some more."

Now, there are people in church this morning who don't think either of these "takes" are out of line. That's because we live in a society in which most daily choices are consumer choices, so people have come to view their relationship to the church in similar ways. After all, you might reason, what is the church all about if not about meeting the needs of people? And, of course, the church *does* want to meet peoples' needs, though this itself begs the deeper questions of which needs should the church attempt to meet? And, who determines which needs the church will not attempt to meet? This issue of meeting the needs of the client population leads congregational leadership to the issue of marketing, that the church should take its cue from business and be more "consumer oriented." Pastors are urged to create "user friendly" worship in which people have their needs met. Leadership is told it should devise programs after they have figured out the "felt needs" of the client base.

In this widely accepted and widely practiced view, worship is a product that congregations offer for consumption, with the primary concern being how to attract and satisfy more customers (or how to keep the ones you've got). The supermarket doesn't tell you that you should prefer romaine lettuce over iceberg. Rather, the grocer discovers those products you want and offers them to you cheaply and efficiently. Thus, most congregations mail out regular questionnaires to ask their congregation

what they want. So, you see, once people come to view choosing a church in ways similar to choosing among competing brands and styles of basketball shoes, then enormous pressure is exerted among the church to conceive itself in those terms as well. So, when people say that are church shopping, we just nod and smile and say we understand completely, and hope that our party tray of activities will be sufficiently attractive.

But what if a congregation believes its worship is not a product for consumption, like lettuce, but an activity that it engages in to glorify and honor God? What if a church serves people, not as a market transaction, but because it is the people of God? What if our choirs work hard on some anthems or choruses, not because they hope you will like it and be inspired by it but because they know we are called by God to be a sign, a signal, a foretaste, a beachhead of God's kingdom in the world? What if I'm preaching this sermon, not because I think its uppermost on your list of weekly wants or needs, but rather because this is what God wants?

Let's look at the Scripture for today, and look at Jesus. Among his own people in his hometown, Jesus encounters rejection and conflict. We're given no word of his teaching, we don't know what he said, only the report that he provoked fierce resistance even among those who were closest to him. And you'll see that Mark links this story with the sending out of the twelve (which we'll talk about next week), but for now just note that when the twelve go out on their own, they also experience conflict.

What's my point? It just this - Jesus provoked controversy. His followers provoked controversy. And something in his teaching or in his person turned away more people than he attracted. Did you know that? Jesus preached the Gospel of forgiveness of sins, of reconciliation to the Father, and Jesus performed signs and wonders, but not everyone accepted. Most did not accept.

How many of you have heard of DeLancy Street? It's a place that employs and houses ex-convicts who are open to getting their life back on track through hard work. They will take in anyone. They will house you and train you and work you back into society. But the person who answers your knock on the door isn't a minister or a social worker. It's an ex-convict. Your entrance interview takes place right there. And you can't scam a scammer. They don't make it easy for you or adapt their requirements to make it easy for you. You have to want what they offer and you have to make some effort to get it. It was the same with Jesus. He didn't soft paddle the Gospel. He wasn't in reality this person of all love and acceptance modern religious people have re-created. He had a mission and part of his mission was to get you to come back to God. Whether you did or didn't wasn't his fault.

I'd argue something else as well - Jesus was willing to suffer rejection. In fact, I believe Jesus was quite content to be misunderstood. I think Jesus preached away more people than he won.

Some time ago, in a Bible class, someone asked, 'Why did Jesus speak so many parables?" One of those present suggested, 'Well, he was trying to communicate with simple, rural people so he had to tell them everything in these little stories, so they could get his point." But another person spoke up and made a really excellent point, saying, "If that's so, then Jesus failed. Most of them didn't get it. The parables aren't all that obvious."

This last person is absolutely correct. The parables aren't that obvious. In fact, the parables functioned in two ways, as grace to those *who did hear* God's Word in them, and as judgment to those *who were unable to hear* God's Word in them. So Jesus

must have used the parables for some purpose other than to ensure that everyone got his point. Jesus, you see, was willing to be misunderstood, and rejected, because the point he was making was not dependent, for its validity, on the acceptance of his audience.

Did you get that? Jesus' point, his preaching, his ministry, was not dependent, for its validity, on the acceptance of his audience. This is an awesome concept, one that most of the churches in our town completely fail to understand. That they fail to understand it is obvious by the way they cater to the "felt needs" of their "client base" by seeking to "meet the needs" of their people, often through some new exciting program that draws in and entertains the flock. But entertaining the flock isn't what Jesus was all about. The Bible is clear that Jesus wasn't particularly concerned about meeting the needs of his audience. No should we be!

Sure, we need comfort and reassurance and a sense of peace. We all need to be exhorted and encouraged. It's hard to follow Christ in an anti-Christian world. We get beaten up and we need to get put back together. But we also need truth and honesty. In church, when it's at its best, we get not what we think we need, but what God thinks we need. The greatest service the church can render the world is not what the world thinks it needs. The church is not primarily about the task of meeting my needs as much as rearranging my needs according to what God wants. Instead of spending so much time asking what people want, we should ask the much more frightening questions, "What does God want?" and "What does the Lord require?"

Folks, believe me, the church is not primarily here to meet people's needs. The church is called to the counter-cultural activity of serving God in a world that does not worship God. We are here this morning to worship God because he deserves to be worshipped.

I reject the notion that this church is one more social institution dedicated to legitimating the marketplace of desire. I reject the notion that this church should cater to the whims of discriminating consumers who expect the church to be another social service agency whose purpose is to court them by providing a smorgasbord of programs and services. Instead of marketing, our primary metaphor at CPC ought to be spiritual formation - we ought to spend more energy worrying about how the church ought to form *our* community and *each other* as concrete embodiments of the Gospel. That is, how do we work together to rearrange our needs according to what God wants?

Though they may be bulging at the seams with people who see a good place to get their needs met, the churches who are putting on a weekly variety show are missing the point. We must not place too much confidence in what consumers want. Frankly, people cannot be trusted to know what is best for them. *God* has graciously given us something that we could not have by our own devices, namely, salvation in Jesus Christ. So, we must be careful to be discerning. Many people come to church for the wrong reasons. Many come seeking confirmation of certain preconceptions, or help with problems, or fellowship with people of like mind or status or race. But thank God, our worship often turns out to be more interesting than our expectations. In worship, in the life of our church, God takes our wrong reasons and reforms them, redirecting our desires, and gives us more than we would have known how to ask for.

Our goal is to worship God, to create an intimate affair where clergy and parishioner are wholly consumed with the adoration of God, not with whether the non-Christian is "getting it" or not, and not with meeting needs. We seek to have worship that is a place where every person experiences God, each week, in a first-time way. Here we sinful human beings learn to worship the

Creator God. Here we are called to be a *peculiar people*. Here we are called to be a people who worship God and who, in the process, find our "felt needs" rearranged. It really is quite ... exciting!

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